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ABSTRACT

The author discusses the need for a more disciplined society through more disciplined education. Discipline and moral values in education are the keys to responsible citizenship, which is disappearing in the United States today. Without abandoning compassion and special attention to minorities, a nationwide commitment to high standards and academic vigor is needed on all levels of education. Studies point out the declining standards in education and the emphasis on students' rights to the exclusion of students' responsibilities. Many of the discipline problems in schools today are probably a response to student boredom caused by permissiveness and a lack of challenge. Although the teaching of values and moral development in schools has many opponents, the current permissiveness and neutrality on values in education have not had many positive results. The educational system should assume more responsibility for teaching the values and virtues of the American way of life. Only education can break the pattern of civic withdrawal in the United States today and, together with media outside the formal school structure such as television, instill in young Americans the values that lead to responsible citizenship. (Author/MK)

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DISCIPLINE, MORALITY, RESPONSIBLE CITIZENSHIP *

T. H. Bell

U. S. Commissioner of Education

I would like to use this significant gathering to talk about discipline and moral values in education. I want to talk about them because I believe they are the keys to disciplined, responsible citizenship and because I fear that responsible citizenship is withering in our land.

I want to persuade you that all of us must raise our voice for a more disciplined society through more disciplined education.

By discipline in education I do not mean punishment, control, restraint. I mean commitment. I mean high standards and academic rigor. I mean sacrifice in the name of excellence.

We are drifting away from that kind of discipline in our schools, colleges, and universities. We must make new commitments to it -- and not only in education. We must make new commitments to it in our life as citizens.

Discipline makes us productive, affluent, strong, enlightened, and free as a people. Take away discipline and you have decay, decline, anarchy, and abandonment of truth.

Thomas Jefferson, in his first inaugural address, asked:

> Would the honest patriot, in the full tide of successful experiment, abandon a government which has so far kept us free and firm, on the theoretic and visionary fear that this government, the world's best hope, may by possibility want energy to preserve itself?

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I fear we have come almost to the point where we must answer yes to Jefferson's question. Academic test scores, voter registration figures -- almost all the indexes we have -- point to the kind of citizen lassitude Jefferson feared.

What are some of the signals we have received that discipline is sagging in our education system? Here are two:

Testimony at a special hearing in Congress on the subject of violence and vandalism in the schools left an impression that many of our secondary schools are gripped by hopelessness and despair. Key witnesses implied that student assaults and violence could not be corrected -- that school authorities could not cope with the situation.

An article in a well-known publication recently reported that more than 40 percent of the graduating class of a reputable university had graduated with honors or cum laude. It implied that standards had slipped at this institution and that its academic rigor had declined.

And here are some of the warnings we have received that undisciplined education bears only the rotting fruit of undisciplined, apathetic citizenship:

The overall voting record is lower in America than in most other democracies. Voters aged between 18 and 21 had the worst voting record of any age group in both 1972 and 1974.

The Yankelovich Survey, financed by a number of foundations, found that in 1967 some 35 percent of Americans aged 16 to 25 considered patriotism an important value -- but that six years later, in 1973, this had dropped to 19 percent.

The National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education analyzed hundreds of handbooks on "Student Rights and Responsibilities" published by schools and State departments of Education. More than 99 percent of them dealt with student rights. Fewer than one percent even mentioned responsibilities.

The Council of Chief State School Officers -- State superintendents or commissioners of education, as they are variously known -- concluded at their 1974 annual convention that "recognizing the need for a new level of citizenship education may be the most important action this council can take at this time."

I agree with the Council, and I have set up in the U.S. Office of Education a task force to make recommendations on citizenship education in the schools. The actual carrying out of any recommendations we may come up with will, of course, be left to State and local educators at their discretion. As Commissioner of Education I cannot impose any education plan on them. However, I feel that I have a responsibility to lead. I will exercise that responsibility.

I am glad to note that others share my concern and are taking active steps to nurture and encourage citizenship education and effective and responsible participation in civic affairs.

The American Bar Association, for example, supports a national clearinghouse on "Youth Education for Citizenship," and the National Endowment for the Humanities helped finance a program for the first 12 grades focusing on such concepts as participation, justice, and responsibility.

A National Task Force on Citizenship Education, supported by private foundations, is examining new concepts and teaching methods for responsible citizenship. Its report, expected in June, will be available to educators and the general public.

I strongly suspect that much of the trouble we have in our schools these days is no more or less than a response to boredom. A more disciplined society would surely give our young people a more disciplined, demanding, and therefore a far more stimulating environment. There is more to learn than ever before in history. Our youth are more talented and able today than ever before.

I do not imply that education should disregard the problems that some learners have. If there is any place where discipline must be constantly mellowed by compassion, it is in our schools and colleges. We must always allow for individual differences. We must stand up for the rights of minorities. Equality of opportunity must begin with education if we are to apply this principle to all facets of living. We must have compensatory education for the disadvantaged. Those with learning problems need and deserve the extra effort and expense to meet their needs.

Teachers should be charitable and kind in applying rules and standards to students deserving of a break. I stand for that. But at the same time

I wonder whether we are not spreading this kind of classroom charity over too many students who need and deserve more challenge.

I emphasize again that disciplined education does not need to be a mindless authoritarian system that drives more than it leads, punishes more than it persuades. But, without abandoning compassion and empathy, we can have a no-nonsense program that calls for mastery of reading, mathematics, spelling, and other basics. Too many students are getting by from one grade level to another without this mastery. We know vastly more than ever before about how to teach the bottom 25 percent, and we should apply what we know.

Not all children will attain a high level of proficiency in reading and mathematics. But we can't live with the high percentage of students who in some large urban school systems fail to reach an acceptable level. We can do better.

A school system committed to disciplined standards of excellence in teaching and learning will take all measures possible to educate the bottom one fourth of the student body. A few systems have demonstrated this capacity. What we need is a nationwide resolve to reach a higher level of performance.

We must help our youth find happiness and fulfillment through serious work in an atmosphere of reasonable standards that are sensibly, firmly, and consistently applied. Today's young men and women need to learn that the closest helping hand is at the end of their own arm. We need a strong, new, vigorous commitment to the old-fashioned work ethic. Let's teach that ethic in our schools. It will be the finest lesson our youth will ever learn.

I speak fairly often to high school and college graduating classes. Sometimes I pose a set of questions and tell the graduates that if they can answer yes to all of them they can consider themselves to be educated persons. Three of my questions seem especially appropriate to mention at this particular seminar. Here they are:

First, have you developed a clear set of standards and ideals to guide your life and your daily living?

A truly educated person lives by some abiding principles that are important and personally satisfying. It is good to be open and teachable and to let one's standards grow with true conviction and conversion to new thoughts. It is quite another matter, however, to agree with everyone and to lack strength of conviction. A very wise man once said "He who trims himself to everybody will soon whittle himself away." Without being rigid, we all need a firm rooting in those basic ideals political views, and principles that we hold to be genuine.

My second question: Have you educated your feelings, your spirit, and your inner soul? Have you learned to enjoy fine music, great art, good literature, and the sounds and sights of nature? A quality life calls for quality thoughts and feelings and an appreciation for the fine things around us. We can't consider ourself educated without these qualities.

The third question in my test of an educated person is: Do you know yourself, and can you apply what you know to maintain your physical and mental health . . . and can you control your appetites and passions?

It is of no avail to be an intellectual giant and a physical weakling! Most knowledgeable people know that exercise, proper nutrition, and adequate rest are essential to good health.

About mental health I ask: Do you live with reality? Are you positive in your thinking? Is your outlook uplifting and wholesome? Do you know how to be free and enjoy freedom?

Some people live as prisoners in a free land because they are slaves to their habits and to their fears and paranoiac outlook.

Those are three of the questions among several others that I ask graduating seniors. I have selected them because they all bear on self-discipline.

A well disciplined life is the only road to true happiness. It begins with an objective, disciplined education system, and it ends with more productivity by the people as a whole and a richer life for them as individuals. Discipline means more freedom, not less. We comply with a few fundamental laws and with some basic principles so that we can enjoy freedom.

I turn now to the teaching of values and the matter of moral development in education.

Many educators believe that it is not the proper role of education to teach moral standards and values in our schools. According to this view, if we expose our youth to many concepts of behavior, each individual will arrive at those personal standards most acceptable to himself.

The next step in this line of reasoning is the idea that to impose standards of conduct, standards of dress, and standards of speech are in many ways coercive. This kind of thought goes on to conclude that there is not much room in a democratically managed institution for imposition of moral values or implied rules of conduct and behavior.

This view of morality and of personal human values leads us to what is called "relevant," or "responsive." We let the so-called "felt needs" and the demands of our students tell us how to run our schools. This in turn leads us to "openness" in education -- open admissions, open classrooms, and open grading that leaves students free to simply elect a pass or fail grade rather than a "coercive" letter grade. We want students to feel free from "authoritarian" controls because such controls subvert a truly democratic society. This entire line of thought is at the heart of many of our problems in today's society.

I find this line of thinking nonsense, but many educators find it hard to oppose. If you teach morality and values, they ask, whose do you teach? They go on to conclude that if a school seeks out students' views and "perceived needs," it will help their motivation.

Concern for motivation is, of course, legitimate. It has led to some changes for the better in education. The problem is that it may be dominating our thinking about the entire education system.

Any benefits from the pursuit of responsiveness, permissiveness, and neutrality on values have not been very spectacular. We seem to have reached an all-time high point in truancy, disrespect, lack of commitment, and a host of other problems that will be with us until we abandon our moral and ethical neutrality.

We must assume much more responsibility for moral development. We should, of course, avoid teaching religious precepts as such, for that is the role of the home and the church. We should also be careful not to get into the arena of the institutionally doctrinaire.

Avoiding those pitfalls, our institutions of education nevertheless should unapologetically teach what we call the American way of life -- the values

and virtues of our system. Moral values, a code of conduct, ethical standards -- all are clearly implied in the Bill of Rights and in the entire structure of our system. We don't have to be morally neutral about them.

The teacher should teach much more than subject matter. The ideals of our Nation as set forth in our Constitution and statutes, and those universal verities of honesty, forthrightness, and unvarnished truthfulness must be re-awakened in our classrooms.

Forcefully and without any equivocation, our schools should teach equality of opportunity, freedom from prejudice, honesty, respect for law. Our stand should be so strong, so clear, that we come across to our students as harboring no nonsense in this area.

We need not be ashamed to teach these great principles. Without them we will teach only half of what our students expect and deserve from us.

We have for a number of years been on a nationwide binge of permissiveness. Anything goes, we have been saying, because everything depends upon the individual's choice, taste, and personal appetite.

But students don't want to be "liberated." They want to be challenged!

Education, if it is anything, must be committed to building self-confidence and ambition and ever-rising horizons in the mind and soul of the youth of our Nation. Our Founding Fathers saw this. I quote Thomas Jefferson again:

> I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves, and if we think them not englightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

Since her earliest days America has faced and conquered many problems, but new ones never stopped coming up. Today we have many that sorely challenge both our technical ingenuity and our value system. Some, like unemployment, inflation, urban blight, and the energy shortage, are obvious. Others, not so obvious, are in every sense equally important and perhaps more far-reaching in consequence -- one especially, and that is the dropout of many citizens from civic life that I have talked about. Self-government is on trial in America today.

Only education can break the civic withdrawal syndrome and reinstall in our everyday life the values that make for responsible citizenship. Our Nation's formal school structure must of course play a lead role in this resurrection. But we also must realize, as did the Founding Fathers, that education doesn't begin or end at the school house or college door.

Television and radio, newspapers, magazines, motion pictures -- as well as our families, churches, and other institutions -- are in every sense integral parts of this Nation's education team and must consider themselves full partners in this educational effort.

There are indications that the tide is turning back in the direction of more citizenship education and participation. I intend to support and encourage this to the fullest in the hope that it will become a full-fledged national movement.

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